

“Storytelling and Flow in Korean Televisual Historical Drama”  
(Revision of “From history to fiction: a narratological study of Korean TV serial drama,” presented at Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference 2006.)

Chan E. Park (The Ohio State University)

The impact of the recent “Korean Wave” signaling Korea’s rise as Asia’s major producer of popular culture could be viewed as extension or variation of the ancient Pan-Asiatic passage of cultural influence, namely, the Silk Road. The Korean Wave may be the latest occurrence of the Road, the classic metonymy of transnational and trans-regional imagination and influence. Started in the 90s, the Wave continues to reach many geographies and peoples through film, music, fashion, and television drama, stimulating many more transnational discoveries and innovations. In all seriousness, Korean televisual serial drama has gained the “flow.”<sup>1</sup> In view of the history and the genre of Korean historical televisual drama in a transcontinental perspective, this paper aims to locate the source of its creativity and drama-making in the quintessential Korean art of “storytelling.”

**Korean TV serial drama and the “Korean current”**

Modernism’s constituencies are *mobo* (modern boy) and *mogô* (modern girl), its forms are *jaej* (jazz), *taens* (dance), *spid* (speed), *sposs* (sports), its expressions are *ero* (erotic), *gro* (grotesque), and *nônsens* (nonsense).<sup>2</sup>

“Still some among the audience, with hardly an understanding what

---

<sup>1</sup>Conceived first by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975), the psychological concept of “flow” as the optimal state of being absorbed in an activity has been widely adopted in explaining ritual and performance by such scholars as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner among others. In this paper, I apply it to explain the sustained creativity in the making of Korean televisual drama; see Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, for further reading.

<sup>2</sup>Oh Sôkch’ôn, “Modônism huiro (Discourse on modern drama),” in *Shinmin*, 1931. 6, quoted in *Han’guk Kongyôn yesul charyo sônjip* Vol. 4, page 4.

challenging paths we take to produce one miserable film, compare it to what they see in the European and American films. Knowing well that our films cannot possibly be expected to match the caliber of Western films yet, they crush us.”<sup>3</sup>

After a century of massive borrowing, fusion, and westernization, Korean modernity seems to be entering an era of self-reflection, self-examination and self-appreciation, in film and TV drama in particular. Fresh confidence gathers momentum with the recent international acclaim--namely, *hallyu*, “Korean current” or “wind” began in early 1990s in China, Japan and spread throughout Asia and further--that places Korea in the seat of pacemaker of Asian popular culture. In the mid-1990s, “a new age of film dawned...later in the decade that an even younger generation of directors, basking in newfound political freedoms and cultural confidence, discovered anew the Golden Age cinema.”<sup>4</sup> McHugh and Abelman explain:

Unlike Hollywood whose economic focus on global market resulted in the systematic suppression of the historical, political, and local detail, South Korean melodrama suffered from no such compunctions or aspirations, and its consequent historical and social specificity provides a starting point for considering the distinctive features of this genre within its national context.”<sup>5</sup>

With fresh recognition begins serious and systematic study of domestically produced films<sup>6</sup> as well as reexamination of early articles, billboards, and criticisms.<sup>7</sup> The interest goes beyond the sphere of cultural satisfaction and national pride to earnest

---

<sup>3</sup> Yi Kyuhwan, “Chosôn yônghwa chejagûn koyôgesô koyôge” (The Chosôn film production is one painful journey after another (January 1936),” in *Han’guk Kongyôn yesul charyo sônjip* Vol. 4, 192-195

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelman eds., *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama*. Wayne State University Press. Detroit, 2005: 13.

<sup>5</sup> McHugh and Abelman, 4.

<sup>6</sup>In *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama*, the contributors discuss the Korean films produced between 1955 and 1972 from the perspectives of gender, genre, religion, and nationalism.

<sup>7</sup>*Han’guk Kongyôn yesul charyo sônjip* (Collection of selected articles on Korean performing art) Vol. 4 (Minsok wôn, 2002) is a reprint from Chogwang (Morning light), serial magazine published during the culturally challenging yet exciting 1930s, of the advertisements of the films shown as well as the articles on film by Korean critics, filmmakers, and writers.

discussion of economics in the name of *munhwa kontents sanôp* (cultural content industry), another buzz-word in the current Korean journalism and media. “If the food is tasty, you seek the restaurant despite the distance, and if a program is interesting, people pay to watch it. What matters is the “content.”...the survival for Korea's next generation.”<sup>8</sup> At the heart of the ‘content industry’ and on the very eye of the ‘Korean wave’ locates Korean televisual serial drama. In terms of style, it responds to many of the Western notions of melodrama: high regard for emotions;<sup>9</sup> driven by one crisis after another;<sup>10</sup> a kind of tragedy re-asserting the values of popular theatre;<sup>11</sup> giving voice to the deepest feelings;<sup>12</sup> to move the audience deeply while laying bare the impossible, painful contradictions of social and personal relationship.<sup>13</sup> Composed of binary oppositions, melodrama serves as “a means of revealing the nature of virtue,”<sup>14</sup> “wherein hero and heroine contend against villain, and the forces of virtue ultimately defeat the forces of evil.”<sup>15</sup> Recent Korean melodramas go further, with social and historical referentiality as yet another component of melodramatic imagination, so “viewers can insert their own histories into the shows by identifying or dis-identifying with characters and their situations, bringing their own memories to bear on the narratives.”<sup>16</sup>

The contagious heat of *hallyu* crossing the national and continental boundaries against the rising antitheses, so far *pan-hallyu* (opposing Korean wind), *hang-hallyu*

---

<sup>8</sup> *Pangsong chakka hoebo* (Screen writers newsletter) No. 210.  
<http://www.ktrwa.or.kr/new/?doc=hoibo.php>

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey D. Mason, 12.

<sup>10</sup> “Introduction,” in Marcia Landy ed., *Imitations of Life: a reader on film & television melodrama*. Wayne State University Press, 1991: 14.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Gerould, *Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama*, 118-134 in Marcia Landy: 131.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Brook, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 50-67 in Marcia Landy: 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Pam Cook, “Melodrama and the Women’s Picture,” 248-262 in Marcia Landy, 248.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey D. Mason, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, Indiana University Press, 1993: 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Keehyeung Lee, “*Morae Sigye*: ‘Social Melodrama’ and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary South Korea,” 229-245 in McHugh and Abelman: 231.

(resisting Korean wind), *yôk-hallyu* (reversing Korean wind), and *hyôm-hallyu* (abhorring Korean wind), “rises from one thing, its competitive contents. The texts equipped with well-woven dramatic structure and characterization captivated the hearts of Asians.”<sup>17</sup> “For the mainly middle-to-older age female audience in Japan, it is “the fatalistic love, and the purity with which the protagonists throw away everything for love,” and even the frequent use of hackneyed and melodramatic themes such as birth secret, incestuous and forbidden relationship, amnesia, terminal illness, and contest of good and evil fails to dissuade them because “you still have to find out what happens.”<sup>18</sup> In China, the Confucian values preconditioning the basic build of the Korean family drama stir a sense of nostalgia. Captured on their radar are caring families and the too-good-to-be-true multidimensional images of modern women who are obedient daughters at home yet independent minds who choose their own professions, destinies, and partners, plus “the captivating sceneries, attractive characters, dramatic plots, white-color protagonists and tragic heroines, background music that penetrates heart, nice dramatic flow, and there’s always rain.”<sup>19</sup> For Hongkongites, Korean drama presents “amazing hybridity between East and West, past and present, and sensible coexistence of family and individual.”<sup>20</sup> In the heartlands of America where the M.A.S.H continues to paint images of the war-ravaged Korea as the sitcom’s backdrop, Korean TV dramas are readily available in Korean and other ethnic grocery and video stores. Available online shopping are a whole DVD set of *Haeshin* (aka *The Emperor of the Sea*) and *Dae Jang Geum* (aka *Jewel in the*

---

<sup>17</sup> Explanation by Yi Eungjin, KBS drama producer, Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Yi Eungjin, KBS drama producer, Ibid., No. 218.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

*Palace*), “an epic television event that redefines Korean popular entertainment!”<sup>21</sup> with subtitles of your choice!<sup>22</sup> In sum, Korean TV serial drama is fast becoming an active agent of the global televisual culture “constituted by and constituting of the inherently globalizing nature of modernity...a multi-directional and multi-dimensional set of processes.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Korean narrative culture and ‘discreet soaping’**

For its “sentimental vision of humanity”<sup>24</sup> and for its commercial dimension, Korean TV serial drama is associated with what is referred as soap opera. Named so for its soap-manufacturing sponsorship of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S., soap opera developed as a radio and television series “depicting the interconnected lives of many characters often in a sentimental, melodramatic way.”<sup>25</sup> The characteristic markers of soap opera are:

Loosely knit story line or collection of stories with a number of competing and complementary sub plots, aimed predominantly at female viewers, focus on female characters, politics of family relationships, large families, large and constant cast, cheap production costs, cliff hanger to ensure continued viewing, and appeals to advertisers.<sup>26</sup>

A serial narrative that outlives any human life cycle, soap opera “proclaims its desire never to end, to continue indefinitely,”<sup>27</sup> and if it does end, it should be an

---

<sup>21</sup> Dae Jang Geum aka: Jewel in the Palace Volume 1, *Yesasia.com*.

<sup>22</sup> *Cinemashops.com*, *ZoomMovie.com* and *Yesasia.com* for a start.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Barker, *Global Television*. Blackwell Publishers, 1997: 3-5.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey D. Mason in *Melodrama and the Myth of America* uses this expression for melodrama. Indiana University Press, 1993: 12.

<sup>25</sup> Words@random, Mavens' Word of the Day, October 28, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> K. Moti Gokulsing, *Soft-Soaping India: the world of Indian televised soap operas*. Trentham Books, 2004: 2-3

<sup>27</sup> Gonzales Requena, 1992: 121 *El discurso televisivo: espectáculo de posmodernidad*, Madrid: Catedra,

“epiphenomenona...the real world attacking the very essence of its formal structure.”<sup>28</sup>

In *General Hospital*, for example, the characters disappear, reappear, disappear again, marry, divorce, marry again, actors displaced and replaced, good character turn evil and vice versa, while the production as a whole parasitismically posits its annual, perennial, and never-ending life cycle into holidays, new years, and other social events happening in the real world. The only interjection to its pseudo-immortality is the all too frequent, shrill, and offensive commercial breaks for every possible product: facial soaps, mouth soaps, anal soaps, vaginal soaps, shaving creams, ice creams, facial creams, shampoos, panties, jockeys, bras, deodorizers, cars, homes, mortgages, diamonds, watches, furs, medicines, poisons, weight control pills, birth control pills, colleges, doctors, lawyers, mayors, senators, presidents, and more and more and more. Behind the glitz and glamour of the advertisement industry hide the insatiable fangs of capitalism calling sweetly its prey every three minutes. Couched in a never-ending tale, these commercials have secured a perpetual marketplace with license to be obtrusive. In essence, American soap is the quintessential *yakchangsa*, the traveling medicine sellers advertising panacea in-between entertainment acts, now moved into our living rooms with multinational corporate backings and stock options. Enduring the all too frequent “soap” interruption, the audience is at first drawn to the ‘operatic’ unfolding of the clandestine relationships, rivalries, intrigues, and sexual innuendos, but tired of its endlessness one by one return to the business of living. The business of selling has since diversified with “reality shows,” the multifaceted ‘pornographic’ acts<sup>29</sup> that utilize real people, situations, and contexts:

---

quoted by Hugh O'Donnell in *Good Times, Bad Times: Soap Operas and Society in Western Europe*. Leicester University Press, 1999: 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> I use the term beyond its narrow reference to commercial sexual exploitation. Similar applications of the

verbal and physical melees, the dilated ‘delivery gate’ of a woman in labor, surgeries, forensics, killings, casualties, and sex, the once-sacred-and-tabooed-turned-public spectacles. The life of American soap in hand with reality shows daily regenerates with fresh converts to perpetuate national and global sales and consumption while spreading and multiplying its clones throughout rest of the world, so much so that in Western Europe, the arrival of the American supersoaps created cultural panic in the 1980s, but “the domestic soap has supplanted the American soap as the main unit of consumption” in the 1990s.<sup>30</sup>

How is Korean TV serial drama structurally, teleologically, and culturally similar or dissimilar to American soap? With the absence of commercial breaks during the show, Korean TV serial drama generates an impression of being primarily entertainment-oriented, at least not flamboyantly commercial. The commercials are placed before and after but never during the episode. The basic etiquette for the culture of telling and listening has not been desecrated yet, largely due to the strong disapproval from the viewers whose daily lives are deeply intertwined with the narrative realities of these dramas and whose *netizen* polls help revise even the stories’ courses. But Korean TV serial drama is no Cinderella supported by her fairy godmother, and commercial promotion surrounding each episode is just as intense but discreet. Before the beginning and after the ending of each episode are provided long lists of companies, manufacturers, and their material and immaterial contributions such as costume, makeup, furniture,

---

term include: Jean Kilbourne from *Killing Us Softly* (Henry Holt, 1969) and *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel* (Free Press, 2000) likens the TV advertisements to pornography that exploits the image of women in alcohol and tobacco advertisements; Slavoj Žižek in reference to the media coverage of war in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and the Related Dates* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2002) also uses the metaphor of pornography in claiming that media desensitizes viewers to the violent consequences of war.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh O'Donnell, 212-213.

appliances, places, goods, products, foods, and services. The products of the big-ticket donors are integrated into the scenes. “The sales of the cell phone the main character uses or the refrigerator standing in the kitchen in the scene will explode starting the very next day. Of course, the companies have to pay a lot for this.”<sup>31</sup> As for transnational business and trade that comes with international popularity, Korea is still learning through trials and errors:

“With the trademark license to air *Dae Jang Geum*, it is China that reaps all the profit, and Korea has been voicing displeasure that ‘while the bear does all the tricks, Mr. Wang pockets all the money,’ ...further exacerbates the *anti-hallyu* sentiment in China.”<sup>32</sup>

Undisrupted by commercial breaks, each episode matures as a serious storytelling capable of drawing the undivided attention of the viewers. Thus Korean TV serial drama has room to develop as storytelling art, as “more than soap opera,” according to a recent convert.

“When you watch soap opera, you can tell it’s soap, but Korean TV drama is more than soap opera the way they change scenes, it makes you think at least a little bit and not just sitting and watching, because when you watch a movie you have to think how and why.”<sup>33</sup>

Such movie-like quality is no accident but the result of high cost and artistic savvy, explains a seasoned connoisseur with transnational outlook:

“They film perfect sceneries both outdoor and indoor, even the interior of coffee shops or restaurants are beautiful and sophisticated, and the colors!... definitely different from American realism filmed in the set. The costumes are

---

<sup>31</sup> Phone interview with Jennifer Lee, Korean American resident of LA, April 1, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> *Pangsong chakka hoebo* (Screen writers newsletter) No. 214.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Debbie Knicely, Ohio State University, March 27, 2006.

impeccable, the faces and the bodies are perfect, all surgically improved...”<sup>34</sup>

Another point distinguishing Korean TV serial drama from American soap is the finiteness of dramatic evolution. Notwithstanding the adjustments and revisions writers make to reflect the viewer polls and suggestions, they more or less maintain the basic narrative lengths not to exceed half a year or so. Extension of drama by adding more episodes in response to soaring popularity is at the same time criticized as “dragging” or “repetitive,” and at producer’s own risk.

*“The 3 major TV stations add more episodes if deemed popular... Viewers criticize the “content deficiency.”*

“MBC decided to extend *Palace*--“filial son”<sup>35</sup> of the company recently suffering from the dwindling viewer rate--from the original 20 to 24 episodes with plans to produce its Season Two. The reason is apparently the drama’s soaring viewer rate nearing 30%. The move turns out disservice to the viewer rate... from 27.1% at No. 20, the original final episode, to 24.6% at 21, then 24.4% at 22.”<sup>36</sup>

Mortality urges creative perpetuation in most cases, and in the case of Korean TV drama, the finite episodic cycle is conducive to enhanced structure and content with beginning, development, climax, and denouement, a narrative art worthy of international merit.

### **Representing new from old, whole with part**

From mere representation of “intimacy in the private sector,” Korean TV melodrama entered the 1990s to reconstruct “into its diegetic world actual sociopolitical

---

<sup>34</sup> Interview of Jennifer Lee, Korean American resident of LA, March 26, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> In this context refers to a show making up for another show’s loss.

<sup>36</sup> Reporter Kim In’gu, Sports Chosôn, March 26, 2006.

events of great historical significance.”<sup>37</sup> The tumultuous modern history of Korea helps the process with rich subject matters by means of lived memories, images, and tales of colonization, war, fight for democracy, the Kwangju Massacre and the continuing global political challenges on their severed land. On the other hand, the inspirations for such famed historical fictions as *Haeshin* and *Dae Jang Geum* were just a few lines from the forgotten pages of ancient Korean history. What is the secret of their narratological success?

A prerequisite of good storytelling is discovering new in old, and effective representation is not factual but procedurally oriented, where small details and gestures are captured in such angles and contexts as to evoke the visions of the whole. Breaking away from the formulaic and binary depiction of gender, morality, and hierarchic divisiveness many of the previous historical dramas had been victims of, the characters in the recent historical dramas are given ‘personalities’ rather than mere sociopolitical identifications and stratifications, and the actions and the places were contextualized and situated as inspired by the 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary consciousness rather than formulaically represented. Inspired by ‘how’ rather than ‘what,’ and informed by the discovery in the making rather than by their formal definitions, such themes as love, hate, friendship, ambition, despair, betrayal, reverence, and irreverence flower in various shapes, sizes, and scents, and the world notices them. In a sense, what are referred as “the contents” in Korean TV drama mean thematic rediscovery in the rediscovery of the art of representation. For example, the camera zooms into cultural and crosscultural spaces both physical and mental in ways never before imagined, into the palace kitchen,

---

<sup>37</sup> Keehyeung Lee, in McHugh and Abelmann, 230-231, discusses the social melodramatic dimension of the SBS prime-time serial, *Morae Sigye* (Hour Glass) in the spring of 1995 for six weeks.

chaneungpark11

deep into the baskets of freshly picked herbs, onto the chopping block, up the cook's greased fingers mixing vegetables, to the tip of the blade previously disregarded from public view as either taboo or unimportant. Even the innermost chamber of the king's heart is not off-limit. The camera misses nothing as the amorous gaze of the dying king up from his royal mattress gropes Jang Geum sitting demurely at his bedside, her eyes, nose, mouth, earlobe, the tiny move she makes with her fingers lightly scratching behind her ear then modestly resting on the front of her *chôgori*, penetrating into the hidden contours of her body, is just one of the numerous examples invoking optimal historical imagination in the minds of the viewers. He was just a man vulnerable to love after all.